

MEMBERSHIP
PROGRAMS
MEETINGS
PUBLICATIONS
ADVOCACY
PRESS ROOM
ABOUT


**Association of American Colleges and Universities**

SEARCH

LIBERAL EDUCATION

**RESOURCES ON:**

LIBERAL EDUCATION  
GENERAL EDUCATION  
CURRICULUM  
FACULTY  
INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE  
ASSESSMENT  
DIVERSITY  
CIVIC ENGAGEMENT  
SCIENCE & HEALTH  
WOMEN  
GLOBAL LEARNING

**Liberal Education, Winter 2005****Reconsidering the Diversity Rationale***By Mitchell J. Chang*

The concept of diversity has come a long way in U.S. higher education, and its impact has been far reaching. Over the last three and a half decades, diversity and its related interventions have evolved to encompass a broad set of purposes, issues, and initiatives on college campuses. The earliest initiatives to increase minority access on predominantly white campuses, and later to enhance gender equity, were prompted by desegregation mandates as well as social justice concerns grounded in the democratic principles of equal opportunity and equality. Although the issue of equitable access remains of paramount interest, since the mid-1980s concerns about the persistence and academic success of underrepresented students of color have become another important thrust of diversity efforts in higher education. Additionally, addressing ongoing incidents of racial and ethnic hostility directed toward students of color and the evolution of what historian Lawrence Levine (1996, 171) termed "a more eclectic, open, culturally diverse, and relevant curriculum" have also become important concerns of a rapidly expanding diversity agenda. These trends do not center only on race and ethnicity; they also encompass other high-stakes categories, such as gender, class, sexual orientation, and disability.

The expansive set of diversity-related interests and activities at colleges and universities suggests that diversity now touches nearly every aspect of campus life. At the same time, broadening the scope of this concept to address a wider range of issues and topics has contributed to greater confusion about its educational relevance and efficacy. Unfortunately, today the concept of diversity is poorly differentiated in higher education, and its goals and impact on students are neither readily apparent nor well understood. This is a major problem because the justification for the many initiatives inspired by the modern civil rights movement and enacted on campuses in the last thirty years or so now rests in large part on this amorphous concept. Perhaps the best known use of diversity in this way is toward the defense of race-conscious admissions practices, which was reviewed in 2003 by the U.S. Supreme Court in the two cases regarding the University of Michigan. Based on my own research findings, I engaged strategically in the court-driven discourse concerning diversity with other social scientists and legal experts to defend those practices.

Now that the nation's highest court has ruled on these cases, I have been working on several projects that consider whether those deliberations have illuminated the concept of diversity and provided more educational guidance. In light of the deliberations, what must educators consider in their effort toward advancing diversity? What issues were insufficiently addressed in the Michigan cases? To address these questions and understand why diversity plays such a critical role in

**LINKS**

[About Lit  
Educatio](#)  
[Current I](#)  
[Previous](#)  
[Ordering](#)  
[Permissi  
Offprints](#)  
[Future T](#)  
[Writer's \(](#)  
[Author Ir](#)  
[Subject I](#)

justifying race-conscious admissions practices specifically and affirmative action more generally, it's instructive to begin with a brief historical background.

### **The elevation of diversity for defending civil rights policy**

No court decision has had more widespread influence on higher education admissions policies than the U.S. Supreme Court's 1978 ruling on *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*, widely regarded as the cornerstone of the affirmative action debate. Before the case reached the U.S. Supreme Court, the California Supreme Court had ruled in favor of Allan Bakke, a mature white male applicant twice rejected by the medical school of the University of California (UC) at Davis. Mr. Bakke had sued the university, claiming that his right to equal protection under the Fourteenth Amendment had been violated in 1973 and 1974, when applicants considered "disadvantaged" were admitted to the medical school even though their test scores and "credentials" were significantly lower than his. Mr. Bakke argued that he was denied access to a government sponsored medical program based solely on his race.

Members of the U.S. Supreme Court were deeply divided over this landmark case, and the decision was divided among three significant opinions. Justice Brennan, writing for a four-member group, found that remedying past societal discrimination was "sufficiently important to justify the use of race-conscious admissions programs," and reversed the California Supreme Court's earlier decision. Justice Stevens, writing for another four-member group, determined that race could not be used to exclude a person from participation in a federally funded program and affirmed the California decision. Justice Powell, however, entered what became the pivotal opinion and cast the deciding vote; his reasoning has since become widely known as the "diversity rationale."

Even though Powell found the UC Davis medical school's specific admissions policy unlawful, he held that a properly devised policy could constitutionally consider race as one of many factors in admissions. In addition to explaining the theoretical legal basis for diversity as a compelling state interest, Powell also expanded on the educational foundation for the diversity rationale.

Explaining the decision, Powell stated in his opinion that the First Amendment allows a university the freedom to make its own judgments as to education, which includes the selection of its student body. He argued that the attainment of a diverse student body broadens the range of viewpoints collectively held by those students and subsequently allows a university to provide an atmosphere that is "conducive to speculation, experiment and creation--so essential to the quality of higher education." This type of atmosphere, he believed, enhances the training of the student body and better equips the institution's graduates. Because such goals are essential to the nation's future and are protected under the First Amendment, Justice Powell concluded that race-conscious admissions practices, when narrowly tailored, serve a compelling educational interest.

Almost exactly twenty-five years after ruling on *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled again on similar cases involving the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. Unlike the *Bakke* case, which targeted the medical school of UC Davis, the Michigan cases challenged the consideration of race in admitting both undergraduate (*Gratz* 2003) and graduate (law school) students (*Grutter* 2003). In June 2003, the U.S. Supreme Court narrowed the use of race by rejecting mechanical scoring systems that assign race/ethnicity-based bonus points to underrepresented students. The Court also determined that the University of Michigan's interest in diversity is sufficiently compelling to justify the use of race and/or ethnicity as a "plus factor" in making admissions decisions in a holistic way. In its judgment, the Supreme Court reaffirmed Justice Powell's claim in his opinion on *Bakke* that educational benefits flow from a diverse student body to an institution of higher education, its students, and the public it serves.

Powell's "diversity rationale" has seemingly also gained widespread support among educators, particularly leaders of our nation's most selective institutions of higher education. For example, in a statement published in the *New York Times*

(Association of American Universities 1997), the presidents of sixty-two major research universities affiliated with the Association of American Universities affirmed the "importance of diversity" as a "value that is central to the very concept of education." Many of the over one hundred amicus briefs submitted by universities, corporations, scholarly organizations, military leaders, and others in support of the University of Michigan sang the praises of Powell's rationale and underscored the importance of diversity.

Even with such high levels of support and the recent endorsement from the Supreme Court, albeit by a narrow margin of 5-4 on *Grutter*, the diversity rationale remains highly controversial. Justice Clarence Thomas, for example, in his dissenting opinion on the *Grutter* decision (2003), wrote that diversity "is more a fashionable catchphrase than it is a useful term" and that, at best, diversity describes an "aesthetic" or "a certain appearance, from the shape of the desks and tables in its classrooms to the color of the students sitting in them." In a forthcoming article, my UCLA colleagues June Chang, María Ledesma, and I argue that the controversy and confusion about diversity are fueled by incomplete reasoning. We identified several major shortcomings with the court-driven interpretation about the benefits of diversity. The reasoning downgrades race as a signifier of inequity and fails to underscore the need for institutional intervention in order for a racially diverse student body to realize any benefits.

In describing diversity's benefits, Powell's rationale leans heavily on what we call "magical thinking," an unrealistic explanation of cause and effect. We argue that magical thinking is evident in Powell's statements regarding two critical junctures in the benefits equation, namely how campuses (1) establish the appropriate sources to initiate the benefits and (2) facilitate the educational process to achieve those benefits. Also contributing to this magical thinking, we contend, is the failure of the rationale to recognize the necessity for remedial intervention. For diversity's benefits to accrue, it's essential that campuses focus effort on remedying the present effects of past discrimination—a point to which I will return later.

Given these shortcomings, can Justice Powell's claim and reasoning about diversity, particularly as it relates to race and U.S. higher education, serve more than a legal purpose and actually help guide educational practice? A body of social science research relevant to the Michigan cases provides one answer to this question.

### **The benefits associated with racial diversity**

In recent years, much attention, including my own, has focused on empirically testing diversity's contributions to students' learning and experiences. Although the U.S. Supreme Court considered this body of research in determining its decision in the University of Michigan cases, some of the finer points of this research escaped the justices. In a synthesis for the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) about diversity-related research, Jeffrey Milem, Anthony Antonio, and I (2005) concluded that the social science research generally suggests that, because racial differences are associated with differences in viewpoints and opinions, an increase in the proportion of underrepresented students can bring to a university experiences, outlooks, and ideas that can potentially enhance the educational experiences of all students. The overall educational impact of racial diversity, however, seems to be largely determined by the level of student engagement or involvement, and so the impact is likely to be strongest when campuses intervene by coordinating a set of mutually supportive and reinforcing experiences.

Perhaps because admissions policies have been so closely scrutinized and tested, policy makers, educators, litigators, and researchers often look first at composition and examine the statistical results of schools' admissions policies. When the focus is solely or primarily on compositional diversity, however, there is a tendency to treat diversity as an end in itself, rather than as an educational process that, when properly implemented, has the potential to enhance many important educational outcomes.

A study I conducted with several colleagues illustrates this potential. We experimentally tested psychological explanations of the impact of diversity by drawing upon theories of minority influence (Antonio et al. 2004). Minority influence theories contend that when minority opinions are present in groups, cognitive complexity is stimulated among majority opinion members. We extended the theory to experimentally test whether the presence of diversity in groups also enhances complex thinking. Our findings suggest a positive effect of diversity, particularly when group discussions include an issue with generally different racial viewpoints (e.g., the death penalty). Our experiments also showed that, in these group discussions, minority students cause others to think about the issue in different ways, introduce novel perspectives to the discussion, and are influential in the group. In short, due to the ongoing power of race to shape life experiences in U.S. society, racial and ethnic compositional diversity can create a rich and complex social and learning environment that subsequently can be engaged as an educational tool to promote all students' learning and development.

### **How educators can really advance diversity**

Because a student's understanding of and willingness to interact with diversity is not assured, and because both understanding and willingness influence engagement in a robust exchange of ideas, a sustained and coordinated effort regarding diversity is necessary to increase the positive effects on student development and learning. In the synthesis for AAC&U noted earlier (Milem, Chang, and Antonio 2005), we found that research on diversity consistently shows that educational benefits do not automatically accrue to students who attend institutions that are, in terms of student or faculty composition, racially and ethnically diverse. Rather, if the benefits of diversity in higher education are to be realized, close attention must be paid to the institutional context in which that diversity is enacted. In other words, it is not enough to simply bring together a diverse group of students. Although this is an important first step in creating opportunities for students to learn from diversity, it cannot be the only step that is taken. Diverse college campuses provide unique challenges and opportunities that must be considered if the learning opportunities they present are to be maximized.

Our research synthesis identifies several effective ways to maximize such opportunities for cognitive and personal growth, particularly regarding increases in cultural knowledge and understanding, leadership abilities, and commitment to promoting understanding. Besides bringing diverse students together, campuses must provide stimulating courses covering historical, cultural, and social bases of diversity and community, and they must create additional opportunities and expectations for students to interact across racial and other social differences. Such intentional institutional efforts are critical because it is much easier and less risky for students to gravitate to people of the same racial or ethnic background. When students retreat from the rich and complex social and learning opportunities offered by a diverse campus and settle into institutional spaces that are more homogenous, they are likely to miss out on the important benefits derived from diversity. Hence, there is a behavioral aspect of the institutional context that is important to examine as we consider how students benefit from diversity on campus. More specifically, our AAC&U synthesis points to several key areas often in need of more concentrated intervention: developing outreach, academic enrichment, and recruitment programs; strengthening a college-going culture in the high schools; providing access to a rigorous academic curriculum; providing academic support for college preparation; and retaining students and advancing their academic success.

Fundamentally, those interventions begin with concentrated efforts toward remedying the present effects of past racial discrimination. This is necessary to establish the appropriate resources and conditions that drive educational benefits associated with diversity, as well as to facilitate the benefits process. As my UCLA colleagues and I discuss (Chang, Chang, and Ledesma, forthcoming), admitting underrepresented students is just one part of a comprehensive intervention strategy. Often, more selective campuses also must actively recruit, provide financial support, and compensate for inequities in K-12 education just to yield a

significant number of underrepresented students. Likewise, in order to facilitate the benefits process associated with a racially diverse student body, even open-enrollment campuses must find ways to engage underrepresented students both academically and socially, as well as to provide more opportunities for all students to interact freely, wisely, and responsibly with one another. Establishing a campus climate and culture that facilitate those types of student engagement and interaction typically begins with interventions, supported by top-level administrators, that effectively address the vestiges of racism.

Failure to intervene at a basic remedial level not only reduces the chances of realizing the benefits associated with a racially diverse student population but also can fuel racial alienation, antipathy, higher rates of departure, and student dissatisfaction with the overall college experience. This point was underscored in an overlooked brief from student intervenors who charged that the University of Michigan failed to take account of legacies of racial discrimination as reflected in histories of segregated schooling, inequitable admissions requirements, and negative and hostile campus climates for historically underrepresented students (for example, see Allen and Solorzano 2000). The student intervenors argued that the university failed to intervene in ways that provided underrepresented students with appropriate institutional support and conditions that fostered their intellectual and social development.

### **Desegregation and integration**

Those who have translated the rhetorical praise of diversity into practice know well that diversity is fundamentally about action--often time consuming and difficult efforts oriented toward remedying the effects of previous exclusions. This work or action toward diversification takes into consideration various levels and dimensions of the campus racial climate and an institution's context in shaping student-learning outcomes. Years of advancing this extraordinary transformation as an educator, researcher, and college administrator have taught me these lessons well. The same lessons have been echoed in many of AAC&U's groundbreaking publications concerning diversity (see [www.aacu.org/issues/diversity](http://www.aacu.org/issues/diversity)), which offer some of the richest insights by leading scholars addressing this democratic transformation in higher education.

As we come to recognize that diversity is a complex process that must be facilitated by a set of institutional interventions, it is especially helpful to understand better two important distinctions that are not mutually exclusive: desegregation and integration. As Education Professor William Trent once told me, the term desegregation can be understood as mostly a description of demographic shifts occurring within a specific community, whereas integration--not to be confused with assimilation--mostly concerns socio-cultural changes that seek to embrace new members of a community. For example, interventions for addressing desegregation on college campuses might focus mostly on enrolling a diverse student population and keeping them engaged on campus. Achieving this, although difficult and important, is only the beginning of the process. Perhaps even more challenging is addressing integration, which requires changes that tend to be more organic and institution specific. Broadly speaking, interventions that seek to achieve integration will critically examine and address some sacred and difficult issues such as an institution's history of discrimination, the community's range of values, the campus behavioral and psychological climate, and existing programs and initiatives.

Perhaps the types of colleges that deserve our closest attention are those that can be described as desegregated but that are having difficulty with integration, as evidenced by reports of racial antipathy, social segregation, classroom micro-aggression, heightened stereotype threat, curricular narrowness, etc. Such a campus illustrates well that the most interesting aspect of diversity is not whether or not there is a certain compositional makeup, but the process communities undergo and how they might intervene strategically to facilitate both desegregation and integration.

In the end, thinking about diversity as a dynamic process rather than as a fixed numerical outcome suggests that the work related to diversity--and very difficult and demanding work at that--is ongoing and ever changing. Political philosopher Stephen Macedo (2000, 3) sums it up well: "At its best, talk of diversity...reminds us of the extent to which the promise of freedom and equality for all remains a work in progress: only partially realized, only partially understood."

---

## References

Allen, W., and D. Solorzano. 2000. Affirmative action, educational equity and campus racial climate: A case study of the University of Michigan Law School and its undergraduate feeders. An expert report commissioned by the Student Intervenor in *Grutter, et al., v. Bollinger, et al*, United States Federal Court, Eastern District of Michigan.

Antonio, A. L., M. J. Chang, K. Hakuta, D. A. Kenny, S. Levin, and J. F. Milem. 2004. Effects of racial diversity on complex thinking in college students. *Psychological Science*, 15 (8): 507-10.

Association of American Universities. 1997. On the importance of diversity in university admissions. *The New York Times*, April 24, A27.

Chang, M. J., J. Chang, and M. C. Ledesma. Forthcoming. Moving from magical thinking to realizing a sociological imagination. *About Campus* 10 (2).

*Gratz v. Bollinger*. 2003. 123 S. Ct. 2411.

*Grutter v. Bollinger*. 2003. 123 S. Ct. 2325.

Levine, L. W. 1996. *The opening of the American mind*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Macedo, S. 2000. *Diversity and distrust: Civic education in a multicultural democracy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Milem, J. F., M. J. Chang, and A. L. Antonio. 2005. *Making diversity work on campus: A research-based perspective*. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities.

*Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*. 1978. 438 U.S. 265.

---

**Mitchell J. Chang** is associate professor of education at the University of California, Los Angeles.

---

To respond to this article, e-mail [liberaled@aacu.org](mailto:liberaled@aacu.org), with the author's name on the subject line.